

AASI NADI 'BULL PLAY' IN THE LEDU TU (MONGGHUL)
AREA, QINGHAI PROVINCE, PR CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The Axja Aadee 'Bull Play' ritual was held on the third day of the first lunar month (Chinese lunar calendar) in Maqang Tugun (Baiyazi), Shdara (Dala) Mongghul (Tu) Township, Ledu Region, Haidong Municipality, Qinghai Province, PR China until 2017, when it was discontinued. Making offerings to Laxja Aadee 'Grandpa Shepherd', which a rocky cliff in the village represents, and performing Bull Play, the residents beseeched Laxja Aadee to safeguard their livestock, particularly against wolf attack. The history of Bull Play, ritual details, reasons for the end of Axja Aadee, and four photographs are presented.

KEYWORDS

Bull play, Ledu, Mongghul, Monguor, Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, Tu

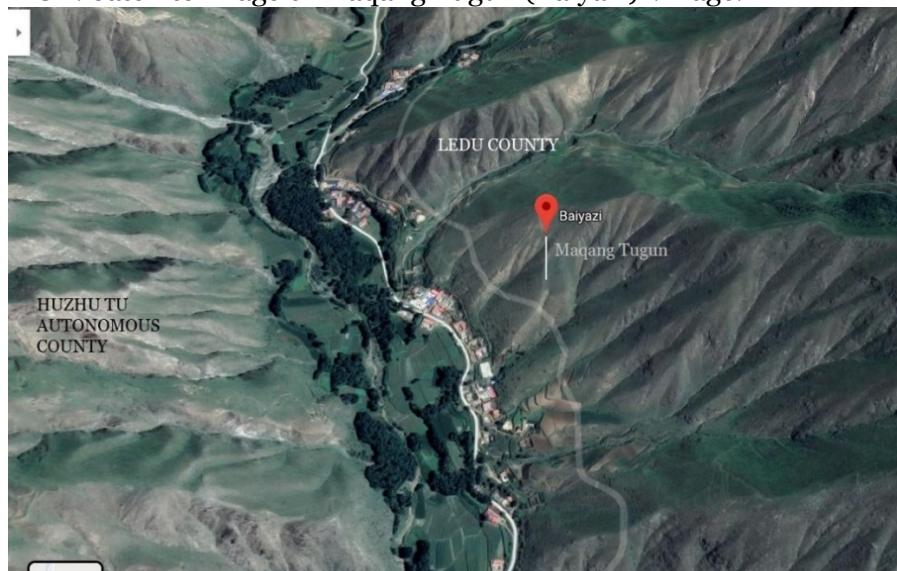
See <https://bit.ly/2ufL1ea> for audio materials recorded by the author while doing research for this article.

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INTRODUCTION

The Shdazi (Shuimogou) area is located in Shdara (Dala) Township, Ledu Region, Haidong Municipality, Qinghai Province, PR China. This once remote mountainous area borders Huzhu Tu Autonomous County. Nine Mongghul villages¹ are situated along the Shdazi River in the Shdazi Valley where, in 2019, 1,334 Mongghul (314 households) lived at an average altitude of 2,500 meters above sea level. Maqang Tugun (Baiyazi) Village, one of the nine, is located along the midsection of the Shdazi River surrounded by high mountains, deep gullies, and narrow valleys. In 2004, there were 157 residents (thirty-eight households). In 2019, there were 120 residents (forty households).²

FIG 1. Satellite image of Maqang Tugun (Baiyazi) Village.³



¹ Shgeayili (Dazhuang), Handu (Hantai), Fangcog (Qianbangou), Benkang (Benkang), Lashizi Kari (Heigouding), Nayan (Naya), Shdara Tang (Dalashangtan), Yangja (Gaojiawan), and Maqang Tugun (Baiyazi).

² I collected the 2004 data while implementing a local bridge project with funding from the Germany Embassy in Beijing (see <https://bit.ly/3oC4AYP>, accessed 15 July 2019), and the 2019 data while visiting the village.

³ An edited version of <http://tiny.cc/jsfiaz>, accessed 31 July 2019.

FIG 2. Map of Maqang Tugun (Baiyazi) Village (in red).¹

This paper describes Axja Aadee 'Bull Play', a ritual that was held on the third day of the first lunar month (Chinese lunar calendar) in Maqang Tugun (Baiyazi), Shdara (Dala) Mongghul (Tu) Township, Ledu Region, Haidong Municipality, Qinghai Province, PR China. Making offerings to Laxja Aadee 'Grandpa Shepherd', a rocky cliff in the village, and performing Bull Play, village residents beseeched Laxja Aadee to safeguard their livestock, particularly against wolf attack.²

Axja Aadee stopped in the late 1950s, restarted in 1983, and was held annually until 2017. Young village adults had lost interest and, practically, many were employed outside the village and unable to return to the village to participate.

After the year 2000, rural residents throughout Qinghai Province increasingly sought work in urban areas where salaries exceeded income from working at home in agro-pastoral pursuits. Huzhu Mongghul villagers found year-round employment as street cleaners, gatekeepers, and toilet cleaners in Xining City and found it difficult to leave work. For instance, at Qinghai University Affiliated

¹ A revised version of <http://tiny.cc/kyfiaz>, accessed 31 July 2019.

² For vivid descriptions of local wolf attacks, see Limusishiden and Jugu (2010:35-36).

Hospital in Xining City, where I worked in 2019, more than seventy percent of the cleaners were Mongghul from Huzhu County.

In 2019, at least five Maqang Tugun Village families had moved to Delingha Municipality, Haixi Mongolian and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture where they bought agricultural land, farmed, and did seasonal labor. Three village families had moved to Xining City to work as street cleaners. Their village household front gates were locked all year, except when they came to inspect their house condition two or three times a year. They departed for Xining the same day.

On 16 March 2019, I interviewed the three Maqang Tugun residents listed below at Lamuxja and Srixjinsuu's home in Maqang Tugun Village:

FIG 3. Consultants.

Name (Sex)	Birth Year	Details
Lamuxja (male)	1962	middle school teacher
Rnqan (male)	1963	farmer, primary school education
Srixjinsuu (female)	1962	farmer, illiteratue, Lamuxja's wife

I used an audio recorder during my interviews and later transcribed the material into Mongghul, which I consulted in writing this article.

Lamuxja and Rnqan participated in Bull Play ritual activities involving burning cypress twigs, lighting butter lamps, burning *huanbari*,¹ and kowtowing to Laxja Aadee.² As part of the ritual, Lamuxja and Rnqan performed as bull and shepherd that involved collecting bread, black brick tea, butter lamps, meat, and liquor from all village households. Srixjinsuu took part in the performance numerous times as a spectator.

Behind Maqang Tugun Village, there was a nine square meter rocky cliff at the foot of Qighaan Mountain that villagers called Laxja

¹ Dry lily bulb stems wrapped in cotton, placed in rapeseed oil, lit, and offered as butter lamps before the deities.

² *Axja* 'shepherd' and *aadee* 'grandpa', i.e., Grandfather Shepherd.

Aadee 'Grandpa Shepherd' and regarded as a deity who protected the village livestock.

FIG 4. Laxja Aadee 'Grandpa Shepherd', the rocky cliff worshipped by Maqang Tugun residents. Grandpa Shepherd was damaged when a canal was dug to power a small hydropower station. Later, when the station no longer functioned, the canal was filled and leveled (16 March 2019, Limusishiden).



FIG 5. Laxja Aadee 'Grandpa Shepherd', the rocky cliff worshipped by Maqang Tugun villagers (16 March 2019, Limusishiden).



FIG 6. Maqang Tugun Village (16 March 2019, Limusishiden).



FIG 7. Lamuxja (right, b. 1962), a middle school teacher in Weiyuan Town, Huzhu County, and Srixjinsuu (left, b. 1962), an illiterate farmer and Lamuxja's Mongghul wife (Lamuxja and Srixjinsuu's home, Maqang Tugun Village, 16 March 2019, Limusishiden).



THE RITUAL

Villagers performed this rite to Laxja Aadee by burning cypress twigs, lighting butter lamps, offering bread, and kowtowing on the third day of the first lunar month. In the meantime, two young village men acted as *hara aasi* 'black bull', and a third man played the role of Grandpa Shepherd. They visited every household and collected donations of bread, meat (pork, mutton, and beef), butter lamps, candy, and liquor. Next, all the villagers gathered in a village home, entertained by the

bull's antics, eating, drinking, dancing, joking, and singing, e.g., liquor drinking songs.¹

ORIGINS

Trees once covered the Shdazi area. People had sheep, goats, horses, mules, donkeys, yaks, and cows and also farmed.

A story told in Maqang Tugun explains Bull Play on the third day of the first lunar month:²

Long ago, villagers annually offered smoldering juniper twigs and kowtowed to surrounding mountain deities on a peak of Qighaan (Baiyashi) Mountain on the morning of the third day of the first lunar month. They prayed to Shge Tingere 'Great Heaven' and all the deities to protect their livestock during the coming year. They particularly prayed that there would be no wolf attack.

One year, as the villagers were returning home from making offerings, they saw a herd of cattle that had come from somewhere grazing on their pasture. This had never happened before. They were dumbfounded and wondered where the cattle had come from. A bit later, the cattle mysteriously vanished.

Afterward, this herd of cattle frequently came and went. As time passed, villagers grew accustomed to this and didn't pay much attention to it.

Then one day, a villager vaguely made out an old man driving cattle toward the mountain in front of the village, and disappear behind it. The villager immediately reported this to others. Some villagers quickly went to search but found no trace of him. They waited, hoping to see the mysterious old man and his cattle, but nothing happened.

¹ For examples of drinking songs, see <https://bit.ly/2TlfGPT> (accessed 7 August 2019) and <https://bit.ly/33r4bei> (accessed 7 August 2019). The second song uses a Tibetan melody. The lyrics are Mongghul.

² Source: Rnqan (b. 1963), recorded by Limusishiden 16 March 2019.

They waited for the next few days, but nothing happened. Strangely, the villagers' cattle and the old man's cattle often grazed on the same pasture with the villagers' animals returning to their owners' homes before sunset. Villagers felt this was odd and appreciated the mysterious old man who seemed to be looking after their livestock.

One day, an old villager went to pray to Great Heaven and all the deities by burning juniper twigs and kowtowing on Qighaan Mountain. With juniper on his back, he walked down the slope and encountered the mysterious old herder who was tall, wore a *yejuari*,¹ a *laxjang* 'long white woolen robe', had a *daleen*² on his left shoulder, and held a whip in his right hand. The villager kowtowed three times. After exchanging greetings, the two old men sat on the ground together and began chatting.

The old villager asked, "Where are you from Grandpa? Our villagers have seen you from a distance. Today, I'm lucky to encounter you here. You drive our cattle and sheep back to our homes in the afternoon. Our cattle and sheep have never been lost. Why are you helping us herd?"

The old herder replied, "I'm from a place where the sun rises. I drove my cattle with my little grandson. We passed through Hara Mongghul 'Mongolian' *ghajari* 'areas' encountering many risks and difficulties and finally arrived here and found abundant grassland, a mild climate, and the friendly people of your village. We found peace and decided to settle here. We escaped from our ancestral land due to brutal tribal conflict. That's why we left and came here. Your ancestors are originally from the same place as we came from. We are the same people. As long as your village's sheep and cattle graze free from beast attack, we will all live together peacefully. I want to protect your village's sheep and cattle forever..."

The old villager was fascinated by this account. Suddenly, the old man stopped speaking. He had vanished. The old villager looked around but did not see him, so he shouted, but no one responded. He waited until sunset, but the old man did not reappear.

¹ A conical hat with red cloth tassels attached to the top.

² A *daleen* is a long narrow woolen bag slung over a person's shoulder or across the back of a pack animal.

The old villager located a small rocky cliff resembling the old man wearing a *yējuari*, a *daleen* over his left shoulder, and holding a whip in his right hand. He kowtowed three times to the rocky cliff and shouted, "Where are you, Grandpa? Are you a person or a deity? You suddenly left without leaving your name. Did you suddenly become this rocky cliff? An ordinary person cannot do this. Local people are looking forward to your return. We will commemorate and sacrifice to you if you are a deity."

After the villager returned to the village and told this story to others, people were surprised, wondered if the old man was human or a deity, and were sorry they could not have the old man with them.

Afterward, wolves no longer attacked the sheep and cattle. The village's livestock proliferated. Every year, while villagers were enjoying Xni Sara 'New Year Festival', they did not need to herd the livestock. They just drove them outside their pens and let them graze freely. In the evening, the livestock returned safely and on time by themselves.

To commemorate the old herder, every year on the third day of the first lunar month, villagers gathered at the rocky cliff and offered bread, liquor, butter lamps, and meat; burned juniper; and kowtowed. They also cooked, drank liquor, sang, and joked. In doing all this, they hoped the old herder would ensure their livestock would multiply and be safe.

BULL PLAY

Villagers referred to the rocky cliff as Axja Aadee and regarded it as a livestock protector. For this reason, they held Bull Play. The third day of the first lunar month was the most important. However, some villagers burned juniper on the first or second day. All the villagers gathered in front of Grandpa Shepherd in the morning of the third day and offered bread, liquor, and butter lamps; tied white sheep wool to bushes on the rocky cliff; burned juniper twigs; and kowtowed three times to Grandpa Shepherd.

Next, villagers gathered amid trees on the west bank of the Shdazi River that flows north to south in front of Maqang Tugun Village. Male elders discussed the bull play performance and chose an adult man and two young, nimble short men. The latter two played the role of the black bull by draping a goat-skin robe that had been turned inside out over themselves. The man in front held an upturned basket on his head, which represented the bull's head. The third man was older and played the role of the shepherd. He wielded a whip, shouted, whistled, and drove the bull from one household to another. Villagers followed the bull to joyfully collect gifts from each household.

A visited household gave bread, meat, liquor, butter lamps, and tea bricks, which young men collected in baskets they carried on their shoulders. Once the gifts were collected, they moved to trees along the Shdazi River, cooked the meat and noodles, and boiled tea. They enjoyed themselves, drinking and eating. Once inebriated, they sang drinking songs, danced *anzhog* 'Mongghul circle dance',¹ *walidi* 'wrestled', chatted until it was dark, and then went home.

Historically, villagers pulled passers-by to the cooking area and asked them to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves.

TIME CHANGES

No one I talked to could explain why Bull Play came to be held at night of the third day of the first lunar month. In the morning of this day, villagers offered bread, burned juniper twigs, lit *huanbari* stuck in the bread and cracks in the cliff as substitutes for butter lamps, kowtowed three times in front of Grandpa Shepherd, and immediately returned to their homes.

After sunset and after livestock were penned, young men and children gathered at Grandpa Shepherd again. There were no

¹ For examples, see <https://bit.ly/2H54m5x> (accessed 7 August 2019) and <https://bit.ly/2Kirzmw> (accessed 7 August 2019).

particular organizers, although some elders selected men to play the role of the bull and Grandpa Shepherd.¹

After supper, they gathered near Grandpa Shepherd and proceeded to follow the bull and shepherd to each home to collect donations of bread, brick tea, sugar, butter lamps, *huanbari*, meat, and liquor.

The two bull actors ran forward and backward, swung from side to side, lay down, stood up, jumped up and down, shook the head, and swished the tail (from a dead cow). If an actor was utterly exhausted during his performance, a new actor replaced him. The actors carefully performed to ensure they did not fall. To do so was considered unlucky, portending difficulties in the coming year.

As darkness deepened, the bull, shepherd, and all the villagers, particularly children and young men, gathered near the rocky cliff and began sorting out the collected gifts. As the bull and shepherd walked into households, children followed, shouting and laughing.

The bull swung its body from side to side, moved its head up and down, and swished its tail. Once inside a home compound, the bull circled the home's *yansuuri* 'small garden plot' at the courtyard center. A man (usually the father) of the household offered a *kadog* 'strip of silk' as a token of respect to the sacred bull and shepherd, lit a butter lamp, and burned juniper twigs. The family representatives gave bread, liquor, meat, tea, or butter lamp into the baskets on the visitors' shoulders. If the bull and shepherd were satisfied with the gifts, the bull raised his head, signifying happiness with and appreciation for the gifts. Grandpa Shepherd waved his whip, shouted at the bull to leave, and started for the next household.

If certain families reluctantly gave a small amount of gifts, the bull lay on the floor of the household's main room and refused to leave. If the family representative insisted on this small contribution, children began to shout and whistle until the owner of the family gave more at which point the shepherd shouted at the bull, which stood up and left the home. If a family refused to give donations, the children humiliated the family by saying:

¹ This ritual was unrelated to Alighuansang, the village deity.

*Teni kudugu huni aasiarang yiiguala hugu buran! Teni kudu gin ciziran!
Yan muu qinsanggi ninba!*

Your family's sheep and bull, and others will all die! Your family will be without children! What a terrible family!¹

Children immediately ran from the household in fear of retaliation from the irritated family. Under such embarrassing circumstances, the bull and shepherd also left the home.

During the Spring Festival, Mongghul hope for an auspicious, prosperous New Year and most liked to provide gifts, but some gave little or refused to give anything. Children's curses meant the family was shamed and ill-fated. In contrast, for generous gifts, children chorused:

*Qi jiu lamanqanna! Qini huni aasi xuanggiai huarighalagu buruu tolaguna!
Teni kashida aasi nanggu fandi npeeleguna. Teni qinsang fosi guiarang
kun kunguan...*

You are so great! Your ewes will give birth and cows will reproduce! Your family livestock will multiply this coming year. All your family will be safe and healthy...

Sometimes bull and shepherd went directly to the household's guest room in case guests were visiting. The bull lay on the ground in the guest room while facing the guests. The guests understood and

¹ Mgon po tshe ring (2010:16) reports a similar curse in Dge rtse (Gengzhi) Township, Brag 'go (Luhuo) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, that was chanted when a family did not contribute donations to appease the 'owner of the wolves' when visited with the skin of a wolf that had been recently killed:

(May) disease come to the people (living in the) upper (story) of the house.
(May) disease come to the livestock (living in the) lower (story) of the house.
(Have) bad luck! (Your) worldly-luck will not flourish.

gave bread, meat, cash, or offered some cups of liquor until the bull was satisfied and left.

After finishing gift collection, participants selected a home to gather in to make merry that evening. Some men always voluntarily offered space for an evening gathering. The selected household had ample space and no old people who would be disturbed. The whole village gathered there to eat and drink - young and old, women and men - and enjoyed bread, tea, sugar, liquor, tobacco, cigarettes, and meat.

Locals offered smoking juniper, *huanbari*, and butter lamps on the altar in front of the rocky cliff, and kowtowed. After deity offerings, the young men gathered at a home to enjoy themselves.

A big fire burned at the center of the selected family courtyard, dispelling darkness. All the villagers gathered around. Some sat on the thin layer of wheat straw on the ground, while others stood surrounding the big fire stretching out their hands to the flame for warmth. Tea and meat were boiled, and liquor, bread, sugar, and cigarettes were offered to every participant. Grandpa Shepherd drove the bull in circles around the *yansuuri* in the center of the courtyard while whistling, shouting and whipping. The bull energetically walked forward, wagging his head up and down, vigorously swinging his body from side to side, and threatening children with its head. Children swiftly dodged or ran away.

At this time, Grandpa Shepherd said:

Ne sain qogshdi, muni aasi guarijigii baisija. Ne sain kayangna. Ndani Maqang Tugun ayilini kashida aasi nanggu fandi npeelenguna. Ayilini kunhgi bai kunguan yama fosi gui.

At this wonderful time, my bull is particularly energetic and excited. It's a good omen. The livestock in our Maqang Tugun Village will be safer and multiply in this new coming year! All our villagers will be safe and healthy.

Participants were extremely active and noisy inside the household. After Grandpa Shepherd finished his short oration, the bull

play performance ended. The exhausted actors removed the basket and goatskin robe and rested on the ground where they were served tea, bread, and liquor.

People drank, ate, and smoked. As time passed, more and more men got drunk. Drinking songs were sung, people teased each other, children played hide-and-seek, and women danced around the *yansuuri* accompanied by circle dance songs.

The villagers continued enjoying themselves until early the next morning.

CONCLUSION

In 2019, the revival of Axja Aadee is an open question, as is the continued existence of Maqang Tugun. Village families were increasingly moving to urban areas, emphasizing the importance of recording performances and history of centuries-old village-level rituals that are often poorly documented and rapidly vanishing.

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TIBETAN¹

dge rtse དགེ་རུ་ཅེ།
 brag 'go བྲག་འགོ་
 daleen, ta len ཏ་ལེན།
 dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།
 kadog, kha btags ཁ་བཏགས།
 mgon po tshe ring མགོན་པོ་ཆེ་རིང་།
 Rnqan, rin chen རིན་ཆེན།

CHINESE TERMS

Baiya 白崖
 Baiyashi 白崖石
 Baiyazi 白崖子
 Benkang 本炕
 Dala 达拉

¹ I thank *AHP* friends for writing the Tibetan.

Dalashangtan 达拉上滩

daleen, dalian 裕綫

Dazhuang 大庄

Delingha 德令哈

Gansu 甘肃

Ganzi 甘孜

Gaojiawan 高家湾

Gengzhi 更知

Haidong 海东

Haixi 海西

Hantai 旱台

Heigouding 黑沟顶

Huzhu 互助

Ledu 乐都

Li Dechun 李得春

Luhuo 炉霍

Naya 纳牙

Qianbangou 前半沟

Qinghai 青海

Shuimogou 水磨沟

Sichuan 四川

Tu 土

Xining 西宁